

## Chapter 2

# The Almighty Three

### *On the Trinity*

Really, what is a person? There is no denying that this is the central theme of the enigma of the Trinity. Presumably we all would agree that the theological term is not the mirror image of the common use, but how much it differs seems to spur endless discussions. Admittedly, the Trinity is a mere theological invention, and we hardly need the anti-trinitarian to alert us to the fact that the term is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Rather, the term arises from the need to articulate a reality that transcends human understanding, such as we touched upon in the opening chapter.

The mere Biblical facts speak of the Son being worshipped by the disciples in a way only the Father ought to have been worshipped,<sup>6</sup> that is, if they distinguished between the Father and the Son, which they surely did, and which Jesus himself did too. It is also conditioned by the fact that they did not harbor any pantheistic notion of deity, which they obviously did not – and which, by the way, tends to lead to self-aggrandizement of believers herein, rather than worship. What happened is entirely inexplicable inside the worldview of strict monotheism of the sort Jews, as well as Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses, for that matter, subscribe to.

The distinction between Father and Son likewise is evident. Later theologians would emphasize them not being different from one another, but distinct since the term difference could imply a difference in kind. Still, in layman’s terms, they are not the same one, yet both are God.

A contemporary polytheist might have contended that he as well worshipped several gods who were all different, yet who were all gods – so where lies the

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Matt.28:9.

problem? “Ah,” the contemporary Christian would answer, “your gods are characterized by being other-worldly beings with supernatural powers invested in them, our God is characterized by such things only one being could possess, say being omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Your gods are merely characterized by that which would also fit our description of angels, and indeed there are thousands upon thousands of angels, all different from one another, yet they are all angels. Our God, though, is above and beyond that.”

Still, while holding onto the One-God-view Jesus the Son distinguishes himself from the Father, as both are distinguished from the Holy Spirit, all of these are facts only a willful anti-trinitarian would dream of denying. It seems we are stuck with a reality not fully comprehensible to us, except for the fact that we can comprehend that it is incomprehensible and ought to be so and therefore take no offence in it, in a way similar to the principles illustrated in the first chapter of this book.

Thus, we confess one God in three persons, yet as mentioned before the meaning of the term person has been debated heavily. Obviously, lessons learned from

our human personality does not exhaustively explain the persons of the Godhead, but some traits surely can be identified through Scripture. Firstly, being a person involves being an “I” and somebody else being a “you”, and the “I” knowing it is the “I” and not the “you”. That is, the Father knows he is the Father and not the Son. The Son knows he is the Son and not the Father. And so forth. These are given facts, unless we turn the intradivine relationship into mere play-acting as Oneness Pentecostals would do. It would do no good, either, to claim that it was only the human side of Jesus that represented the “I” of the dialogue contrary to the Father’s “you”, since there are obvious cases of the eternal Son speaking through the person of Jesus Christ, as in “before Abraham was, I am.”<sup>7</sup>

Equally certain, the three persons communicate, lay plans, and assign tasks,<sup>8</sup> and on top of that, there are affirmative feelings and emotions between them.<sup>9</sup> Even if these are not mirror images of similar human incidents, some likeness and resemblance there must be if God’s

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<sup>7</sup> John 8:58.

<sup>8</sup> For example, John 11:41-42; John 5:22; or John 14:26.

<sup>9</sup> John 3:35 and John 14:31.

revelation of himself can be said to reveal anything at all. In a very real and robust way they are somehow interacting, and likely in a way somewhat similar to how we as human beings interact. To deny this would render the notion of the divine persons meaningless, regardless of the differences compared to human experience.

Quoting Olson, “the doctrine of the Trinity says God is *one what and three whos* – one divine substance shared equally by three distinct persons”.<sup>10</sup> Peckham defines the personhood of the Trinitarian persons as “a subject with self-consciousness, reason, and will”.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, McCall declares the divine persons “to be ‘persons’ in a rich and robust sense of the term,” and in stating that there are “genuine interpersonal, ‘I-Thou’ relationships with the triune life”<sup>12</sup>

Some traits are the cause of more difficult and deeper questions, like does each of them possess a will

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<sup>10</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2016), chap.10

<sup>11</sup> John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021), chap.7

<sup>12</sup> Thomas H. McCall, “Relational Trinity: Creedal Perspective,” in *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), Chap.3.

of his own or do they possess only one will? We might begin by observing that when the wills of humans conflict it would always be caused by circumstances due to human nature and human limitations. Sometimes we disagree because we each have limited and imperfect information. Between omniscient beings there would be no disagreements due to such. At other times we disagree simply because we have conflicting personalities and preferences. Any mutual decision in such cases must take the form of a compromise, but a divine being in harmony and sharing interests and values would not need to compromise on an intra-personal level. Obviously, we would never imagine something along the lines of the Son saying, “I really don’t know about that, Father, but if you insist, I will go along”, neither the notion of them holding a vote in case of disagreement as we as humans might and must do. We might instead perceive the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit always willing the same, as if each of them on their own had arrived at exactly the same decision as the other two.

Thus, Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, I believe, neither represents two wills at odds, whether

that be his will and the Father's will or a human and divine will of his own. Rather, he asks a question fitting for the circumstances, facing and fearing God's wrath, yet always fully willing to accept the unanswered prayer.

Many analogies have been offered to illustrate the enigma of the Trinity, for instance that of water, ice and steam being of the same material, yet coexisting everywhere in different forms. However, being merely matter and not a living being, quintessential aspects of the Trinity are left out of such analogy, and in depicting differing modes of H<sub>2</sub>O, the illustration almost leans towards modalism.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, we might instead think of identical triplets. In a sense, they are the same human being, at least as far as our identity is somehow defined by our DNA, akin to ice, water and steam all being H<sub>2</sub>O. Most likely, said triplets would be very much in unity, as far as decisions and preferences go. Yet, they would necessarily be three persons, each perceiving the world from their own perspective, viewing the others as a

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<sup>13</sup> That is, the notion of the three divine persons merely representing differing modes or expressions of the one God, thus denying the personhood of the three persons as well as any intra-trinitarian relation or interaction.

“you” opposed to one’s own “I”. Still another analogy might be someone having himself cloned in a younger version, should technology at some point allow this. Such a father could indeed claim that his son was his “spitting image”, akin to Jesus’ own description of his relationship to the Father,<sup>14</sup> while they would still be having reciprocal relations to one another. Admittedly, these illustrations on their part fail to fully grasp oneness and coeternity, and it merely underscores that any analogy will fall short in some areas and should not be taken for more than a helpful tool for the mind.

The question of hierarchy within the Godhead has been ferociously debated and often rebuked. I suspect that debate is largely built upon a mistaken projection of our sense of different value attributed to different tasks or different positions.

The notion of Father and Son signifies some hierarchy, some would claim, since a son would be subject to his father and obedient as well, suggesting some power play at work. Entirely wrong, others would argue, as such would imply a difference of worth and thus a

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<sup>14</sup> John 14:9.

difference in being, as argued by Giles, claiming that “If the Son of God is *eternally* subordinated in function, and cannot be otherwise, then in his *being/essence/nature/substance* he is in some way less than the Father.”<sup>15</sup> I am not entirely sure of the logic of either, and probably the Christmas imagery of baby Jesus, his mother and the heavenly Father has done much damage to our ability to perceive the equality of the persons in the Godhead.

Nevertheless, it is equally obvious that they did not flip a coin when deciding whom to be the incarnate, that is, something between them, something eternally there, caused one to have one task and the other to have another.<sup>16</sup> Thus, I maintain that a strong link exists between the “Immanent Trinity” and the “Economical Trinity”, that is, the Triune God as he is eternally versus how he reveals himself through history, including the differing tasks each of the three persons takes upon themselves.

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006), 57.

<sup>16</sup> In this I disagree with Thomas Aquinas who regarded it possible that each of the three persons might potentially have been the incarnate one. Yet how could such a choice between the three have been taken, had it not already, eternally and therefore ontologically been taken.

The best analogy I can present would be the feelings that existed between myself and my late earthly father. As adults there was no longer any formal subordination between us, both of us were in a very true sense equal, sharing the same civil and legal status, yet my feelings towards my father were different from his feelings towards me. Even among adults of equal worth the difference in our feelings defines our relation. One of us was a son, the other a father. Might we not as well imagine an “adult” Son in relationship to his Father, with unidentical feelings towards another. Each is an “I”, seeing the other “you”, yet what they feel is not the same, and the relation of Father to Son is not a mirror image of the relation of Son to Father, as some illustrations of the Trinity might lead us to believe. The traditional trinitarian definition says that the Father is not the Son, and that the Son is not the Father, but both are God – yet there might be more to it than that.

God is revealed as a triune God, yet also reveals himself in differing circumstances as either the Father, the Son, or the Spirit. Jesus tells us plainly to address the Father, particularly in the Lord’s prayer, “Our Father,

thou who art in Heaven...”,<sup>17</sup> rather than addressing the triune God as such. Equally plain, the implicit call of discipleship to “follow me”,<sup>18</sup> as stated by Jesus, compels us to follow Jesus, the Son, not to follow the Father or the Spirit. Similarly, it would be nonsensical to give praise along the lines of “Father, I thank you that you died for me...”. Thus, intuitively and logically we offer one type of gratitude towards Jesus for what he did in dying for us and another type of gratitude towards the Father for sending him. Neither would it come across as natural or biblical to rephrase the example as “God, I thank you that you died for me”. While in a sense God died and this is the scandal of the gospel, somehow this too misses the mark.

Other incidents seem to tell the opposite tale. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”,<sup>19</sup> and later he created humankind in “in our image, after our likeness”.<sup>20</sup> If only hinted, this refers to the entire Godhead, and later New Testament references hints at both

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<sup>17</sup> Matt.6:9-13.

<sup>18</sup> Say, John 1:43

<sup>19</sup> Gen.1:1.

<sup>20</sup> Gen.1:26.

the Father and the Son participating in creation,<sup>21</sup> making it some sort of joint venture.

The pattern that presents itself is that of a God who on a relational basis, as well as on a salvific basis, primarily reveals himself as three – and wants us to relate to each of the three persons. However, on a creational as well as on a providential basis, the one God presents himself and seemingly wants us to relate to him as such. This compares well with the notion from the first chapter in this book regarding the cylinder being revealed sometimes as a circle and sometimes as a rectangle.

It is worthwhile to remember, though, that viewing the circle while always stating, “remember, it is not just a circle”, might be true enough, but it obscures the point of the circle and it blurs the perception of the circle. Stressing the unity when God reveals distinction, even labelling the perceived “threeness” as “tritheism” is therefore mistaken at best and confusing at worst. Trinitarianism is best expressed in the ability one moment to be praising the one God for the glory of creation and the next moment to be praising the Father for being the

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<sup>21</sup> Heb.1:2.

Father or the Son for being the Son, treating each as God in their own right. And while Arianism<sup>22</sup> and Modalism are real heresies, Tritheism comes across as a straw man. A pagan convert at New Testament times might possibly have slipped into thinking of the Trinity as some sort of small pantheon with the Father being the chief God, akin to the pantheons of Greek or Norse mythology. But really, when was such notions seriously held and upheld like Monist heresies have been? The threat has always come from there. Nevertheless, it is still essential to stress that we believe in one God, not merely three Gods who get along well, as McCall pointedly puts it.<sup>23</sup>

God's choice of relating to us as both Father, Son and Spirit suggests differing types of feelings towards us from each of the three persons in the Godhead. While all under the umbrella of agape love, it seems that the Father loves us with a fatherly love, while Jesus loves us with a friendly love – or at a collective level, even a

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<sup>22</sup> Named after Arius from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century who claimed that the Son was a created being, even if perhaps the first or greatest, and thus not sharing in the deity of the Father.

<sup>23</sup> McCall, *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, chap.4

romantic love. As far as the Spirit goes, we might perceive his feelings towards us as either akin to the homely enjoyment of a dwelling place, that is, a home, or alternatively the enjoyment of some sort of working relationship, us acting as coworkers or employees in the grand task at hand. Even when our imagery might be somewhat lacking it is hardly debatable that Scripture paints a picture of differing types of relationship between us and the almighty three. Put in another way, we are created in the image and likeness of God, and at the same time, as the Father's family, the Son's bride, and the temple of the Spirit.